

5-2008

Writing the History of Canadian Parks: Past, Present, and Future

Alan MacEachern

The University of Western Ontario, amaceach@uwo.ca

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/historypub>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Citation of this paper:

MacEachern, Alan, "Writing the History of Canadian Parks: Past, Present, and Future" (2008). *History Publications*. 1.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/historypub/1>

Writing the History of Canadian Parks: Past, Present, and Future

Alan MacEachern

Department of History
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario
N6A 5C2
phone 519-661-2111 x84993
fax 519-661-3010

paper arising from the
Parks for Tomorrow 40th Anniversary Conference
Calgary, Alberta
May 2008

Abstract

This paper discusses the state of historical writing on Canadian national parks. It traces writing in the field since 1968, arguing that there are still many and sizable gaps in the literature. It then outlines some themes in parks history which deserve more attention today, and which might assist the management of parks in the future. Finally, it suggests reasons to believe that an upsurge of writing may well be imminent.

In the preface to his 2007 book *Taking the Air: Ideas and Change in Canada's National Parks*, political scientist Paul Kopas writes of how difficult it can be to analyze parks policy, given that the subject covers everything from townsites to caribou. "Interestingly," he writes, "tracing that history helps to define the policy change that needs to be explained."¹ I was struck by that word "interestingly." As a historian who has worked on national parks, I tend to think it self-evident that history can illuminate the nature of parks policy – or pretty much anything else. In attempting to make decisions, we may as well draw on the experiences of those who came before us, who may have had to make similar decisions. The past is by no means a sure guide to the future, but then again it is the only database we have. And since we are constantly responding to the past anyway, we may as well do so with purpose and systematically.² Yet one can hardly fault Kopas for his observation, given that for the book he wrote – which traces how Canadian parks policy has been shaped by changing and competing pressures brought to bear by politicians, bureaucrats, interest groups, aboriginal groups, scientists, legal authorities, and the general public – Canadian historians had provided him with nothing of a model.

Given the importance of Canadian parks both as national symbols and international archetypes, it is surprising just how little of a historical nature has been written about them. The first and only general history of Banff was published in 1974.³ There is no history of Canada's first parks commissioner James Harkin, as there is of the United States' first, Stephen Mather.⁴ There is no history of Parks Canada the institution, as there is of the Canadian Wildlife Service and the U.S. National Park Service. There is not even a readily available general history of the parks system, what with both Sid Marty's 1984 *A Grand and Fabulous Notion* and W.F. Lothian's 1987 *A Brief History of Canada's National Parks* out of print.⁵ Keyword "Banff history" into Amazon.ca and the first hit is to *The Banff Coastal Command Strike Wing Versus the Kriegsmarine and Luftwaffe, 1944-1945*. Try "national parks history Canada" and you get *Uncle John's Bathroom Reader Plunges into National Parks*. (I am delighted to report that my own *Natural Selections* appears right after the bathroom book, number two.⁶)

The organizers of this conference invited me to present a paper on "Conservation History as a Basis for Knowledge Transfer, Policy and Planning, and Visioning." I would beg their

¹ Paul Kopas, *Taking the Air: Ideas and Change in Canada's National Parks* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), vii.

² John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History: How Historians Map the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8-9.

³ Eleanor G. Luxton, *Banff, Canada's First National Park: A History and a Memory of Rocky Mountains Park* (Banff, Alta.: Summerthought, 1975).

⁴ I am told that E.J. Hart has a manuscript biography of Harkin moving towards publication.

⁵ Sid Marty, *A Grand and Fabulous Notion: The First Century of Canada's Parks* (Toronto: NC Press, in co-operation with Cave and Basin Project, Parks Canada, and Supply and Services Canada, 1984) and W.F. Lothian, *A Brief History of Canada's National Parks* (Ottawa: Supply and Services, 1987).

⁶ <http://www.amazon.ca> (accessed 11 June 2008).

indulgence to shift the focus somewhat – and not only because I have not used the word “visioning” before and don’t feel inclined to start. Before we can take lessons from conservation history (or what is more often today labeled environmental history), that history must first be written, and it is my argument that there has been relatively little such writing to date. My paper is in three parts. The first section reviews the state of writing on Canadian parks history since the first Parks for Tomorrow conference in 1968, outlining in broad strokes what has been written and seeking to locate and explain some gaps in the scholarship. (While not denying the importance of websites, journal and magazine articles, museum exhibits, and other media for presenting parks history, I tend to focus on books as an “indicator species” of the state of this work.) The second section discusses some themes in parks history which deserve more attention today, and which might assist the management of parks in the future. The third section suggests why we might be optimistic that such writing is on the horizon.

**

As in 2008, the 1968 Parks for Tomorrow conference began with a session entitled “Setting the Stage.” But in 1968, arguably five of the section’s six papers considered the parks system’s history, whereas in 2008 arguably just one of eight does.⁷ “History and Ideology” has become a separate session on day two; setting the stage now apparently need not be historically-informed. I say this not to criticize the conference’s organizers, but rather to suggest how marginal the writing of parks history has become – and how as a culture our willingness to employ history has lessened.⁸ In 1968, J.I. Nicol, Marion Clawson, Roderick Nash, Robert Craig Brown, and Gordon Nelson – a government bureaucrat, a director of an NGO, two historians, and a geographer – all appreciated the value of putting the contemporary parks situation in a historical context. Their conclusion was that Canadians had never, since the nation was founded, given sufficient attention to wilderness – that we were, in Nash’s words, a half-century behind the Americans – and that this was a luxury we could no longer afford.

⁷ In the 2008 conference “Setting the Stage,” only Harvey Locke focuses any attention on the pre-1968 period. On the first Parks for Tomorrow conference, see J.G. Nelson and R.C. Scace, eds., *The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow*, 2 volumes (Calgary: National and Provincial Parks Association of Canada and the University of Calgary, 1969); and J.G. Nelson and R.C. Scace, eds., *Canadian Parks in Perspective: Based on the Conference, The Canadian National Parks: Today and Tomorrow* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1970). Other works in the period surrounding the first Parks for Tomorrow include Sylvia Van Kirk, “The Development of National Park Policy in Canada’s Mountain National Parks, 1885-1930,” unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Alberta 1969; Ronald Clifford Arthur Johnson, Ronald Clifford Arthur, “The Effect of Contemporary Thought Upon Park Policy and Landscape Change in Canada’s National Parks, 1885-1911,” unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Minnesota 1972; and Robert D. Turner and William E. Rees, “A Comparative Study of Parks Policy in Canada and the United States,” *Nature Canada* 2 no.1 (January/March 1973): 31-36.

⁸ This is in part because historians themselves have surrendered their relevance by choosing topics of marginal policy significance, or neglecting to highlight their work’s policy implications.

The 1968 conference was a defining moment in Canadian parks scholarship, but also turned out to be something of a high water mark in terms of historical writing.⁹ Over the next twenty years, there were works that contributed to parks history, of course – Janet Foster’s 1978 *Working for Wildlife* springs to mind – but a sustained discussion never materialized.¹⁰ The most important parks writing of the 1970s and 80s was the four-volume *A History of Canada’s National Parks* beginning in 1976 (and its 1987 one-volume abridgment), written by W.F. Lothian, a longtime Parks Canada staffer. These were dry, institutional histories. Lothian himself came to regret that they provided little insight into the people involved in the parks service, the ideals which they were attempting to enforce, or the relationship between parks and the broader culture.¹¹ Still, the fact that his books were authoritative and comprehensive probably steered other scholars away.

Another book of the late 1980s, Leslie Bella’s *Parks for Profit*, signaled in its very title a new direction for parks history. Such works were critical of the parks system, intent on showing the discrepancy between parks philosophy and parks in practice. Such thinking had already been evident in R.C. Brown’s 1968 article “The Doctrine of Usefulness,” which argued that the early parks were created not from grand principles, but from a pragmatic desire to make the best possible use of resources. What was new was the trope of disappointment, of disillusionment, which first demanded acceptance of the park philosophy. (Bella’s first sentence is “National parks are supposed to be about preservation.”¹²) With much of society having coming to accept park ideals, it was easier to write critically of the parks’ actual history. The fact that Parks Canada kept excellent archival records, chronicling their attitudes and actions every step of the way, made it easier still for historians that followed. So, for example, Bill Waiser’s *Parks Prisoners* studied prisoner-of-war camps in parks. My *Natural Selections* studied expropriation of longstanding communities in Atlantic Canada. Recently, John Sandlos’ *Hunters at the Margin* studies how the Parks Branch, among other government groups, often misunderstood northern ecology and undercut the

⁹ Two volumes in the 1990s continued the tradition of bringing scholars and parks people together to discuss parks, including their history: Rick Rollins and Philip Dearden, eds., *Parks and Protected Areas in Canada: Planning and Management* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1993) with a second edition in 2002 – see especially Kevin McNamee, “From Wild Places to Endangered Spaces: A History of Canada’s National Parks” – and John S. Marsh and Bruce W. Hodgins, eds., *Changing Parks: The History, Future and Cultural Context of Parks and Heritage Landscapes* (Toronto: Natural Heritage/Natural History, 1998).

¹⁰ Janet Foster, *Working for Wildlife: The Beginning of Preservation in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978). Other works in this period included Marty, *A Grand and Fabulous Notion*; Bill Waiser, *Saskatchewan’s Playground: A History of Prince Albert National Park* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1989); C.J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada’s National Historic Parks and Sites* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990); and C.J. Taylor, “Legislating Nature: The National Parks Act of 1930,” in Rowland Lorimer et al., eds., *To See Ourselves / To Save Ourselves: Ecology and Culture in Canada* (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1991): 125-37.

¹¹ W.F. Lothian to Gwendolyn Smart, 9 March 1984, James Smart papers, MG30 E545, Library and Archives Canada.

¹² Leslie Bella, *Parks for Profit* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1987), 1.

hunting rights of the people who lived there.¹³ Given the ironies of parks history, and given scholars' penchant for criticism, it is entirely likely that such histories will continue to appear.

There has not been a great deal of writing on Canadian national parks history so far this decade, and we are already in 2008. But three recent books suggest that the field is headed in a new, exciting direction. I.S. MacLaren's edited *Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park*, Cliff White and E.J. Hart's *The Lens of Time*, and I.S. MacLaren's (with Eric Higgs and Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux) *Mapper of Mountains* are extremely attractive and highly visual as well as scholarly.¹⁴ All three also incorporate repeat photography – the pairing of historical photos with ones taken at the same location today – as a means of documenting landscape change (and continuity) in the Canadian Rockies. This is nothing new in itself: Gordon Nelson used repeat photography in his paper at the first Parks for Tomorrow. What's new is the underlying assumption that parks tell us about more than just the parks themselves, that they can serve as a gateway to understanding broader issues. These books¹⁵ rely on parks' extensive documentary records, but study the parks not as islands or just for themselves but as indicators of broader environmental and cultural trends. What's also new is an expectation that such work can be made of interest to an environmentally-informed general audience.

**

Having offered this brief synopsis of where parks history has been, I will now suggest where it might go. In short, I would argue that there is room, even need, for much more scholarship devoted to the history of Canadian parks, and to understanding broader histories, including our national history, *from, or through* parks. Let me first give an example of each.

Here is part of a poem written to honour the first Canadian Parks Commissioner, James Harkin, following his retirement.

¹³ Bill Waiser, *Park Prisoners: The Untold History of Western Canada's National Parks* (Saskatoon, Fifth House, 1995); Alan MacEachern, *Natural Selections: National Parks in Atlantic Canada, 1935-1970* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); and John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2007). See also I.S. MacLaren, "Cultured Wilderness in Jasper National Park," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 34 no.3 (1999): 7-58; and Rick Searle, *Phantom Parks: The Struggle to Save Canada's National Parks* (Toronto: Key Porter, 2000). Less critical writing of this period would include Gavin Henderson, "James Bernard Harkin: The Father of Canadian National Parks," *Borealis* (Fall 1994): 28-33; and Robert J. Burns with Mike Schintz, *Guardians of the Wild: A History of the Warden Service of Canada's National Parks* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000).

¹⁴ I.S. MacLaren, *Culturing Wilderness in Jasper National Park: Studies in Two Centuries of Human History in the Upper Athabasca River Watershed* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007); Cliff White and E.J. (Ted) Hart, *The Lens of Time: A Repeat Photography of Landscape Change in the Canadian Rockies* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007); I.S. MacLaren with Eric Higgs and Gabrielle Zezulka-Mailloux, *Mapper of Mountains: M.P. Bridgland in the Canadian Rockies 1902-1930* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2005).

¹⁵ And for the Bridgland book, a related website: <http://bridgland.sunsite.ualberta.ca/index.html> (accessed 11 June 2008).

But he cried Gadzooks! To his waiting staff, 'Ye must shoulder spade and axe
 The House is full of Scotsmen, we must hit them hard with facts!
 Get facts bedad (with none to be had for who knew of Park's existence?
 But a newspaperman's life is as good as a wife to stiffen a man's persistence)
 So he drove us forth, east, west, south, north, with noses close to the ground
 Hard on the trail of the Lonesome Facts and at last one fact was found
 But JB cried, 'By the buffalo's hide! One fact is enough for me,
 'Tis a great deal more than I had of yore when I wrote politically.
 And out of that small and modest fact, with the single yeast of his mind
 He fashioned a Tourist Gospel, that struck those Scotsmen blind.
 Till even Mr. Meighen said, 'That Harkin man is a honey.
 This is far less painful than taxes, let us give the lad some money!' ¹⁶

This is a useful poem, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it has parks staff describing what they themselves are declaring to be an important moment of the agency's history, the discovery of the "fact" that scenery was worth more per acre to Canada than wheat fields were. The poem's flash of bawdy humour – metre is important when reciting the fourth line quoted above – also serves as a reminder to readers today that people of the past were just as real and three-dimensional as we are. Finally, because the poem offers us primary source information about events of almost a century ago, but only arrived at Library and Archives Canada in 2006 as part of the personal papers of parks staffer M.B. Williams, it reminds us that there is still much more to be learned about the history of parks, and even that there are more sources with which to do so.

A second example, that of Banff warden H.U. Green, shows how the history of parks can open itself up to broader histories. Born in France in 1886, Green moved to Canada early in the new century and joined the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. While working at Riding Mountain National Park in 1929, he became friends with Grey Owl and they co-wrote "A Philosophy of the Wild" for *Forest and Outdoors* two years later. Adopting the name "Tony Lascelles," Green developed into a well-known nature writer and came to the attention of the National Parks Branch after writing several articles defending the Branch's decision to tolerate predators in parks. He was hired at Banff as a "special warden" in 1943. But over the next decade, Green grew increasingly resentful of the respect being given ecologists and ecology in the parks, and his writing became more "scientific" and much more interventionist. By the early 1950s, this nature writer, who had become associated with parks because of his defense of predators, was urging the cull of both prey and predator populations. H.U. Green / Tony Lascelles' story is a story of parks, but it is also a story told *through* parks, of the history of professionalization in Canada and of the move from natural history to ecology in the twentieth century. Parks history gives us access to such broader environmental, social, and intellectual histories. In practical terms, national parks contain

¹⁶ From "An Interminable Ode," National Parks Branch file, M.B. Williams papers. This collection was made available to me by Ms. Frances Girling, Williams' niece, and was brought to Library and Archives Canada for donation, where it exists (under a different arrangement structure) as R12219-0-3-E. See http://mikan3.archives.ca/pam/public_mikan/index.php?fuseaction=genitem.displayItem&lang=eng&rec_nbr=3719360&rec_nbr_list=1899418,132695,120877,191551,23440,2895528,2837673,3719360,3630090,3191717 (accessed on 11 June 2008).

arguably the richest archival collection in Canada relating to environmental matters. In abstract terms, they represent explicit attempts to define what elements of Canadian nature are deemed most precious and worth saving, so in them we have a wonderful opportunity to see how Canadians have thought about and acted toward nature. Because parks are supposed to be, but aren't, the antithesis of how nature is treated in the rest of society, they end up being very clear expressions of that society.¹⁷

Historians have barely scratched the surface in terms of what might be gained from researching and writing history of and through our Canadian parks. At the outset I mentioned some of the most obvious gaps in scholarship: no general histories of the overall parks system, of the parks agency, of our major parks. To those many more could be added, such as:

- *Histories beyond the mountain parks.* The Canadian parks system has been truly national for quite a long time now. Fundy National Park's creation in 1947, for example, is as near in time to Banff's creation as it is to today. Yet very little historical work has been done on parks beyond the Rocky Mountains, let alone on the entire system as a whole. More work is needed on the parks system as a national one, on its development nationwide, and on Parks Canada's work in a wide variety of landscapes and bioregions.
- Related to the previous, *histories on parks' relationships with local populations* – aboriginal and otherwise. This has become a quite common topic in parks and conservation literature worldwide over the past two decades,¹⁸ but has been surprisingly neglected in Canada – more surprising still given the prominence of native history in this period. Sandlos' book already mentioned and Ted Binnema and Melanie Niemi's 2006 article on the exclusion of Stoney from Banff are two of the few works that examine parks' relationship with aboriginal populations.¹⁹
- *Visual histories.* Though our culture took an increasingly visual turn in the 20th century, the extensive photographic record of parks still tends to be used at best to confirm and at

¹⁷ I develop this argument further in *Natural Selections* and in "Lost in Shipping: Canadian National Parks and the International Donation of Wildlife," *Method and Meaning in Canadian Environmental History*, eds. Alan MacEachern and William J. Turkel (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2009), 194-212.

¹⁸ For example, see Patrick C. West and Steven R. Brechin, *Resident Peoples and National Parks: Social Dilemmas and Strategies in International Conservation* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991); Theodore Catton, *Inhabited Wilderness: Indians, Eskimos, and National Parks in Alaska* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997); Roderick P. Neumann, *Imposing Wilderness: Struggles over Livelihood and Nature Preservation in Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Robert H. Keller and Michael F. Turek, *American Indians and National Parks* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998); Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of National Parks*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Philip Burnham, *Indian Country: God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000).

¹⁹ Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, "'let the line be drawn now': Wilderness, Conservation and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada," *Environmental History* 11 (2006): 724-50.

worst to decorate text-based scholarship. The recent repeat photography books are an exception to this, of course, but many other projects await. How were the parks photographed and filmed by Parks Canada and government tourist agencies? How can photos taken by the branch to document parks management be utilized? What can tourists' own photos tell us about their interpretation of these places?

- *Comparative histories.* The Canadian parks system grew up alongside those of other nations, and it would be well worth comparing their developments. One might contrast the Canadian history with that of Great Britain or nations of the British diaspora such as New Zealand and Australia. And the Canadian system's close ties to the Americans one – sometimes rivals, often colleagues – would make comparison between these two countries especially fruitful. I think of how in the early 20th century, the Canadian parks relied on the Americans for advice on how best to deal with predators, providing everything from the biological justification for killing them to how-to tips on snares vs. spring traps. At the same time, the American Bureau of Biological Survey was defending predator extermination at home by claiming that the species would continue to thrive in Canada and Mexico. This seems a perfect example of how fully understanding either the Canadian or the American parks system requires an understanding of both.

These are examples of histories which compare different places, but there is also need for what might be called temporally comparative histories. For example, wardens' wildlife censuses were being taken in the parks by the 1930s, and ecological surveys were occurring by the 1940s, yet there have been very few systematic attempts to employ such data in the textual equivalent of repeat photography, comparing past wildlife populations to today.

- *Collaborative histories.* There are few topics of historical inquiry that draw the attention of more disparate groups of researchers – and audiences – than do parks. Historians, historical geographers, art historians, environmental studies scholars, and others all work on matters surrounding parks. Environmental NGOs such as the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and Under the Sleeping Buffalo Research²⁰ also work at the confluence of parks and history. Parks Canada itself possesses more historians than perhaps any other federal government department. Add to this the arrival in recent years of information technology tools which have allowed the transaction costs for communication to drop through the floor, and you have a wonderful environment for collaborative park histories. I would like to see academics working alongside parks researchers more often – in edited collections and conferences like Parks for Tomorrow, but also having the two groups experiment with actually researching and writing together, on something such as a wiki or an online oral history project. (Scholars can teach public servants not to use words like “visioning”, and they can teach us not to use words like “hegemony” or “othering”.) It is this sort of close collaboration which is most likely to bridge our professional divides.

**

²⁰ See <http://www.cpaws.org/> and <http://www.utsb.ca/> (accessed 11 June 2008).

This essay has traced some of the trends since 1968 in writing Canadian national parks history, and argued that there is still much to be learned of and through that history. It ends by offering three grounds for optimism, three reasons for believing that an upsurge of such work may well be imminent. The first is the prevalence of new information technologies, as just mentioned. For example, the internet's capacity to facilitate collaboration between researchers, to reach a variety of audiences at once, and especially to draw together and present textual, visual, and aural sources in one place makes it conducive for creating new parks history projects.

The second is the rise of environmental history in Canada. This field, studying the relationship between people and nature through time, has made great strides in this country's university history and geography departments this decade. For example, about one-third of the first thirty Canadian Research Chairs given to historians were granted to support research in environmental history. And since 2004, NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment / Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l'environnement – which, in the interest of disclosure, I direct – has become a node for collaboration within the field; the network is looking to build partnerships with Canadian parks groups and to develop parks history.²¹

The third reason to imagine an impending rise in parks history is the opportunity afforded by the upcoming centennial of the Canadian national parks service in 2011. This is an anniversary that deserves to be memorialized: ours was the first such parks service in the world, and it has been a leader in the international field over the past century. It is my understanding, however, that Parks Canada has few plans to honour the anniversary, both because to do so might seem immodest (since the centennial is not of the parks system, established in 1885, but of the agency itself) and because its responsibility for historic sites means its focus will instead necessarily be on the 2012 bicentennial of the War of 1812! But to fail to pay attention to the 2011 centennial of Parks Canada would be a real missed opportunity, even a disaster, for those of us wishing to see national parks and their history given prominence in Canada. We must, in the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt quoted by Harvey Locke at this conference, first persuade and then pressure Parks Canada to honour its own history. And we must do so ourselves, planning to have books, articles, websites, museum exhibits, and other media ready for the 2011 centennial, and in doing so demonstrate the utility of understanding and valuing the history of Canadian parks.

²¹ See <http://niche.uwo.ca> (accessed 11 June 2008).